

Coal boom carries high price as accidents rise

By Faye Bowers

The Christian Science Monitor

Published: August 13, 2007

A herculean effort to rescue six coal miners trapped deep inside the Crandall Canyon Mine in central Utah is focusing national attention on a downside of the nation's coal boom. As the industry gears up to extract record amounts of coal for growing U.S. energy needs, it's employing a growing cadre of workers in an inherently dangerous occupation.

Nowhere is this trend clearer than in Utah.

It has seen the fastest rise in coal-mining employment of any major coal-producing state. From 2002 to 2006, the number of miners has jumped from 1,525 to 1,994 — a 31 percent increase. A significant number of those workers appear to be Hispanic.

The effort to save the six workers at Crandall Canyon Mine is the latest in several high-profile attempts in the nation's mines in recent years, which underscore the risks of the occupation. Indeed, coal mining is one of the nation's 10 most dangerous industries: Last year, at a time when the overall worker fatality rate fell to a 15-year low, coal-mining fatalities more than doubled, according to a U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics report released last week.

That increase was mostly due to the Sago mine accident and three other multiple-fatality incidents in 2006, in which 21 workers died. "The fatality rate for coal mining jumped 84 percent in 2006 to 49.5 fatalities per 100,000 workers, up from 26.8 in 2005," the report states.

Yet the demand for workers in the coal industry is likely to only increase. Many of this country's coal mines are gearing up to provide fuel for new power plants coming on line. According to a U.S. Department of Energy report last May, 151 new coal-fired plants are in the planning stages, representing a \$145 billion investment — producing enough energy to service 90 million U.S. homes.

In fact, U.S. coal production is projected to increase an average of 1.5 percent per year through 2025, says the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

It comes down to America's growing appetite for electricity. "Basically, we are using more power," says Jason Hayes, communications director for the American Coal Council, a Washington coal-use advocacy group. "We all have our BlackBerrys, computers and other electronic gadgets, so everybody is using more energy. ... One of the cheapest, easiest forms of fuel we have is coal."

Currently, Hayes says, coal provides 52 percent of this country's energy — a proportion likely to grow.

And one fertile ground for coal-mining ventures is Utah, where the industry has upgraded mechanization in the past 20 years. The state's richest seam of coal swings in the shape of a canted L from Colorado westward, under the Wasatch Plateau, then dropping down south into Emery County — the area in which the Crandall Canyon Mine is situated.

"Utah coal fuels 90 percent of electricity in Utah," says Alan Isaacson, research analyst at the University of Utah.

While it's not clear what caused the Crandall Canyon Mine accident — and the investigation to follow may take some time to complete — it's now known that three of the six miners trapped deep within the mountains are Mexican nationals.

As they have for much of U.S. history, immigrants provide a significant proportion of the labor necessary to operate the mines. Like the boom and bust cycles of the industry, their numbers have waxed and waned over the years.

Mexican miners began arriving in the state in 1910, during their country's revolution, says Utah state historian Philip Notorianni. Immigration slowed down during the 1920s and 1930s, both because of the Depression and immigration restriction laws, he says.

But as Americans left to fight in World War II, immigrants were again brought in from Mexico and Puerto Rico to staff the mines, he says. The 2000 Census provides the latest official indication of numbers of Hispanics working in Utah's coal mines, says Pam Perlich, a senior research economist at the University of Utah. For that year, 8,150 people were employed in the coal mining industry. Of those 596, or 7.3 percent of the civilian labor force, were Hispanic.

"Hispanics didn't really start coming back (to work in the mines) until the 1980s," says Nancy Taniguchi, history professor at California State University Stanislaus and author of "Necessary Fraud: Progressive Reform and Utah Coal."

© 2007 *Deseret News Publishing Company* / All rights reserved